

Three Islamicate Songs from Metro Detroit

*Translated by Graham Liddell, Kristin Dickinson,
Michael Pifer*

Translators' Preface

When different refugees and immigrants fled the crumbling Ottoman Empire for a multitude of reasons in the early 20th century, they brought their entangled musical cultures with them to their new homes in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. Many of these established and emerging diasporic communities settled in Metro Detroit, drawn not only by promises of labor at Ford factories, but also by an infrastructure that ranged from coffee shops—where post-Ottoman immigrants gathered, smoking and drinking until the wee hours of the morning—to newly established churches, synagogues, and mosques, and to the seemingly neutral territory of Greektown, where something like a post-Ottoman musical culture thrived in a variety of tongues. So, too, did diverse performers circulate through the nightclubs, concert halls, and coffee shops of Metro Detroit, on their way westward to Chicago or eastward to New Jersey and New York. Other performers came from farther abroad, from the newly established Republic of Turkey or the Middle East, stopping in Detroit while on international tours. Material culture also circulated between these diasporic communities—pamphlets, records, lyrics, catalogs—moving sometimes not only within the United States but also between Detroit and the formerly Ottoman territories.

The following three songs all had different presences in the multilingual performance cultures and nightlife scene of Metro Detroit. The first, “Gondola on the Nile,” was recorded by Louis Wardini as the second single on his label, Wardatone. Having migrated from Beirut to New York as a child around 1904, Wardini lived in numerous cities with Syrian Lebanese communities before moving to Detroit in the late 1920s. Even when he relocated to Indiana in 1938, Detroit remained an important place of reference for Wardini throughout his many travels across the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. In addition to performing in Detroit establishments such as Saint Maron Hall in the 1940s, Wardini also founded Wardatone as a Detroit-based recording label in 1951. Replete with references to wine and the oud, “Gondola on the Nile” evokes a sense of conviviality typical of Islamicate poetry, while its emphasis on both love and abandonment plays on the key themes of the ghazal’s poetic

form. Words such as شوق (*shawq*, meaning longing or yearning), بعد (*bu 'd*, meaning distance and translated here as “absence”), هجران (*hijrān*, meaning abandonment or separation), and أسمار (*ashār*, meaning sorceries or, in this context, the charms of a beloved, translated in the lyrics as “enchantment”) demonstrate a connection between love and separation but also distance and travel, allowing for a metaphorical connection between the beloved and longing for home. With its Egyptian willows and titular reference to the Nile, the song is clearly located in the Islamicate world, even as the image of the gondola introduces a more generic cosmopolitan reference to Venice as a symbol of romance. Wardini’s song thus captures a number of tropes central to the experience of diaspora, all while creating a unique blend of sounds, themes, and worlds that were listened to in Detroit.

The second song, “I Went into the Garden,” in dialectal Armenian, is quite different. According to a pamphlet printed in Detroit, it was performed by a local vocalist in Palmer Park on Sunday, July 22, 1928. Unlike the recording by Wardini, which reaches for a kind of cosmopolitanism that stretches from the recording studios of Metro Detroit to the lagoons of Venice and the Nile of Egypt, the cosmopolitanism of “I Went into the Garden” is harder to read. Like many Armenian (and, more broadly, Middle Eastern) songs and poetry, the song also evokes the searing agony of being separated from one’s beloved. Armenians, of course, have long participated in shaping Islamicate and Persianate musical cultures, drawing on the available constellations of themes, styles, tropes, and sometimes even plain words across many languages, and recasting them for an Armenian (and sometimes Christian) sensibility. This song is no different. It describes the quintessential meeting place for the lovestruck—the garden (or, Palmer Park, if one prefers)—as a forlorn lover wanders bereft of his/her beloved, haunted by an absent rose. The words s/he uses to describe the beloved (*yar, aziz yar*), common to many Armenian songs from the period, are not Armenian at all; rather, they formed a stock vocabulary in other Islamicate musical cultures, such as Persian and Turkish, for talking about love. In short, even in places where only one ethnic

community might gather to hear and appreciate music, the subtle presence of other communities, cultures, and languages can often still be sensed, even in audible ways.

The last song, “Why Have I Come to America?,” is a particular testament to this entangled nature of musical performance and production in Detroit. It was originally written in the Turkish language by a Greek musician named Achilleas Poulos, then lightly adapted by an Armenian musician named Jimmy Nazarethian. The portion of lyrics printed here come from a slim pamphlet sold at Paros Book Store, Phonographs & Records, on 806 South Soley Avenue in Detroit, which advertised recent releases by Pharos (P’aros) Record Company. These lyrics are printed with the Armenian alphabet, but in the Turkish language, using a widely common mixed language and script form known as Armeno-Turkish. Here, another kind of psychic torment is on display. The absent beloved, the *yar* from “I Went into the Garden,” has been replaced by America itself, whose charms have beguiled and ensnared the hapless lover, who is now doomed to wander far from hearth and kin. The song is significant, then, in part because it offers a cogent demonstration of how post-Ottoman musical cultures continued to change and evolve in America, and it did not simply remain frozen in time and lifeless once transplanted in alien soil. To help readers visualize the way that the script and language itself cross many different territories, we have included here the original Armeno-Turkish (in the Armenian script), a rendering in the modern Turkish script, and finally our English translation.

These three songs paint but a small portrait of the lives of once-Ottoman musical cultures replanted in Metro Detroit, which then, of course, also became American musical cultures. Collectively, these and other materials form the online collaborative public humanities project “The Middle East in Metro Detroit: (Post) Ottoman Migrations,” which explores different spaces where these heterogeneous communities came into contact with one another; relied on one another; and, sometimes, erupted together in uneasy tensions and conflict. For more, the project can be found at <https://translatingmichigan.org/the-middle-east-in-metro-detroit>.

Arabic



“Gondola on the Nile”

by Louis Wardini

Translated from Arabic by Graham Liddell¹

SIDE ONE

I adore you, I am pleased with you,
O loveliest of all God's people
I delight in our rendezvous
[My heart is enthralled]²

Your beauty is captivating
[It transforms] all my sadness [to joy]

¹ The translator wishes to thank Yousri Alghoul, Ali Harb, and Ammar Owaineh for their help in transcribing the Arabic lyrics.

² Brackets indicate Arabic words that could not be identified for certain while listening to the septuagenarian recording. These parts of the translation are based on best guesses.

The birds sing to your beauty,
perched on the branches of the Egyptian willow

I adore you, I am pleased with you,
O loveliest of all God's people

Come, let's take a gondola out on the Nile
to thank the Lord with longing and kissing
Blissful love,
effortless serenity,
a castle being swayed from side to side

[O bearer] of the oud:
Play on the strings
sing to me, sing
the music of enchantment

O, my gondola, O my companion,
fill the cups of wine
Come back [through the corridors] of serenity
Come back to the Nile

SIDE TWO

Call my name, cure me
Sing to me, [nurture] me
Love scorches me
and your absence wears me down

O my love, O artist,
you've abandoned me once more

O my Lord, O Provider
bring me your beneficence

Call my name, cure me
Sing to me, [nurture] me

Come, let's take a gondola out on the Nile
to praise the Lord with longing and kissing
Blissful love,
effortless serenity,
a castle being swayed from side to side

O [bearer] of the oud:
Play on the strings
sing to me, sing
the music of enchantment

O, my gondola, O my companion,
fill the cups of wine
Come back [through the corridors] of serenity
Come back to the Nile

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DETROIT, MICH.



«Շիլլիլ» ՏՊ. 209 Griswold ԹէԼ. RAnd. 1225

“I Went into the Garden”

Performed at Palmer Park, Sunday, July 22, 1928³

Translated from Armenian by Michael Pifer

I went into the garden, my heart was burned, wounded,
From the dear beloved [*aziz yar*], my wounded heart was bereft,
bereft.

I called to my dear beloved [*aziz yar*], there was no reply;
Amidst the flowers, my sweet rose was gone.

My pitiless beloved toyed with my heart,
Scorched my liver, and left me, left.⁴

³ Multiple versions of the song can be found in print; this translation reflects the pamphlet's lyrics but has substituted “khagh” for the pamphlet's more unusual “khash” in the penultimate line, as the former is a relatively standard reading for this song.

⁴ This is a rather literal translation of an originally Persian-derived phrase meaning, figuratively, to strike with inconsolable grief. The liver, and not only the heart, is an organ of affect in many traditions.



Կը պարունակէ «ՓԱՐՈՍ» թէքստոներու վրայ երգուած

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PAROS BOOK STORE
PHONOGRAHPS & RECORDS

806 SOUTH SOLVEY AVE.
DETROIT, MICH.

“Why Have I Come to America?”

Original Turkish by Achilleas Poulos; Armeno-Turkish variant
lightly adapted by Jimmy Nazarethian
Booklet of Record Lyrics, sold at Paros Book Store, Phonographs &
Records, 806 South Solvey Ave., Detroit
Translated by Kristin Dickinson and Michael Pifer

The published Armeno-Turkish:

Նէտէն կէլտիմ Ամէրիկայա
Թութուլտըլմ զալտըլմ ավարայ,
Ծիմտի պին թէրրէ փիւշմանըմ,
Ֆազաթ կէշտի, ահ նէ՛ չարէ,
Ա՛ն կէլմէգ օլայտըլմ,
կէօրմէգ օլայտըլմ
Թէք սէնի շիրին Ամէրիկա,
Կէօրմէգ օլայտըլմ
կէլմէգ օլայտըլմ.

Rendering in Modern Turkish:

Neden geldim Amerika'ya?
Tutuldum kaldım avare,
Şimdi bin kere pişmanım.
Fakat geçti, ah ne çare,
Ah gelmez olaydım,
Görmez olaydım
Tek seni şirin Amerika,
Görmez olaydım
Gelmez olaydım.

Why have I come to America?
I became ensnared, a wanderer I remained,
A thousand times over do I regret it.

But it's too late, O what's the use?
O, I wish I hadn't come,
I wish I hadn't seen
You alone, sweet America,
I wish I hadn't seen you,
I wish I hadn't come to you.